

Valuing the small and ordinary moments of children's participation

Guidance for practitioners and advisers working with children aged 3 to 7



About this guidance

This guidance is based on research with children aged 3–7 across Wales exploring how they understand and experience participation in everyday school life. Children took part in creative activities that supported them to share their ideas and perspectives.

Across the settings involved, children described participation in similar ways. Their experiences highlight the importance of everyday relationships, routines, and small decisions in shaping their sense of agency and belonging.

The insights from this research have been translated into practical considerations for practitioners and advisers.

Key messages for practice

- Participation for younger children is relational and happens through everyday moments in play, routines, and interactions with others.
- Small decisions about play, comfort, environment, and learning are meaningful opportunities for children to influence their experiences.
- Participation should be embedded across the school day, not limited to specific or timetabled activities such as “choosing time.”
- All children should experience participation as an everyday right and entitlement, not something dependent on behaviour or adult approval.
- Children want their ideas to make a visible difference to what happens in their learning and classroom environments.

What children said about their experiences of participative rights, and what this means for practice

1. Participation happens in small and ordinary moments

What children told us

Children described participation through everyday choices, such as where to play, what to do, whether to wear a coat, or how to learn. They also talked about decisions related to comfort and wellbeing, such as light, space, and temperature.

"I would play outside when it is raining". (Matt, Nursery, Age 3–4)

"We should include everyone in circle time, both reception classes". (Addison, Reception, Age 4–5)

"I would choose to stay inside, read and do maths". (Luna, Yr 2, Age 6–7)

What this means in practice...

Practitioners should:

- notice and create everyday opportunities for children to influence decisions.
- respond to children's preferences in routines, play, and learning through flexible and responsive practice.
- recognise that participation is not only about formal voice activities but also about everyday choices and interactions.
- value children's choices about comfort, safety, and wellbeing as part of participation.
- support children to shape their learning spaces and classroom environments over time.

Advisers can:

- support professional learning focused on practitioner noticing and responsiveness to children's ideas and preferences.
- encourage reflective dialogue about how participation happens in everyday classroom practice.

2. Participation should not depend on behaviour

What children told us

Some children felt they were listened to only when they behaved well or had "good" ideas. This suggests that children sometimes experience participation as conditional, dependant on adult approval or behaviour expectations.

"(I am listened to) sometimes when I'm being really good". (Gideon, Yr 1–2)

What this means in practice...

Practitioners should:

- ensure all children have opportunities to express their views and ideas.

- avoid linking participation to rewards or compliance within behaviour systems or classroom routines.
- reflect on how behaviour systems may influence which children are listened to.
- create inclusive routines that support every child to share their ideas and perspectives.

Advisers can:

- support schools to review behaviour and relational practice in ways that strengthen children’s participation.
- encourage the development of participation as part of inclusive and equitable practice.

3. Participation should be embedded across the day

What children told us

Children described participation as happening mainly during specific times such as “choosing time.” This suggests that children may experience participation as limited to particular parts of the day rather than as part of everyday classroom life.

“We choose when it’s choosing time”. (Harvey, Year 1–2)

What this means in practice...

Practitioners should:

- embed participation across everyday routines, transitions, and learning throughout the school day.
- involve children in decisions about their learning activities and experiences.
- extend children’s interests over time rather than limiting them to short or isolated activities.
- support continuity and depth in learning by responding to children’s ideas and choices.

Advisers can:

- support schools to move beyond-participation that is limited to specific activities or times of day.
- link participation to curriculum and pedagogy within everyday classroom practice.

4. Children understand participation through experience

What children told us

Most children did not recognise formal language about rights but understood participation when they could make decisions and influence what happened in their everyday experiences.

“Right means correct”. (Harriet, Nursery)

What this means in practice...

Practitioners should:

- use everyday language to talk about choice and influence.
- support children to recognise their ability to influence what happens.

- connect participation to relationships and learning.
- avoid over-reliance on abstract terminology such as rights language.

Advisers can:

- support professional learning that links rights to everyday practice for younger children.

5. Children want to see that their ideas made a difference

What children told us

Children valued being listened to but wanted their ideas to make a difference to what happens in the classroom.

"It made me feel really good when the teachers listened". (Harvey, Year 1–2)

What this means in practice...

Practitioners should:

- give feedback to children about what decisions have been made.
- make changes visible to children.
- involve children in reviewing their environment and learning.
- revisit children’s ideas over time.

Advisers can:

- support schools to build feedback loops.
- encourage reflective evaluation of participation practices.

Supporting professional learning

Schools and local authorities can strengthen participation by:

- developing reflective practice around practitioner noticing’s and responsiveness.
- supporting relational and inclusive approaches to participation.
- linking participation to children’s agency and wellbeing.
- creating opportunities for collaborative enquiry.

Conclusion

Valuing the small and ordinary moments of participation is a powerful way to strengthen younger children’s agency, inclusion, and wellbeing through practitioners’ everyday noticing’s. By embedding participation in daily practice, practitioners and advisers can support meaningful and equitable experiences for all children.



Supporting everyday participation in early years and primary classrooms:

Reflective questions for practitioners

How to use these questions

The following questions are intended to support professional reflection and dialogue among practitioners. They can be used in team meetings, coaching, or professional learning to strengthen everyday participation and children's learner agency.

1. Noticing everyday participation

- Which small and ordinary moments do I recognise as participation?
- When do I notice children influencing decisions in everyday classroom life?
- What opportunities for participation might I be overlooking in daily routines?

2. What matters to children

- How do I find out what matters to the children in my class?
- Do I take children's everyday concerns seriously? (for example, comfort, safety, or where they learn.)
- How often do children influence decisions about their environment and routines?

3. Behaviour, power, and voice

- Do behaviour expectations influence which children I listen to?
- Are opportunities to express views ever linked to reward or compliance?
- How can I ensure that all children feel safe to share their views?

4. Making participation visible

- How do I give feedback to children about what has changed as a result of listening to their ideas?
- How often do I return to children's suggestions and follow them through?
- What does children's meaningful influence look like in my classroom?

5. Participation across the school day

- How can I support the influence of children across the school day?
- What decisions do I currently make that children could be involved in?
- How can I extend children's interests over longer periods of time?

6. Language and understanding

- How do I talk about participation in ways children understand?
- How do I support different ways for younger children to express their views, including play, drawing, and gesture?
- How can I make participation more visible and meaningful for younger children?